Examine whether authoritarian capitalism is a viable alternative to its Western liberal version, to promote long term economic growth and development.

By

Toby E. Evans

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1.0 Introduction

At first glance, the term 'authoritarian capitalism' appears to be oxymoronic.[1] The economic concept of capitalism implies some measure of freedom of thought and action to ensure the efficient allocation of capital to areas of demand. To Western observers, whose countries are historically associated with liberal-democratic capitalism, the idea that economic growth and development can be achieved without true freedom or democracy is quite confronting; the very concept of authoritarianism raises disquiet in the average Westerner. However, it is undeniable that authoritarian regimes are increasingly turning to the free market as a means of ensuring the economic prosperity of their countries; and the influence of an efficient and largely unquestioned authoritarian government has ensured that some achieve great success. We need only to look at the examples of China and Singapore to see that huge economic growth (increasing GDP) and development (industrialisation, increases in the standard of living and adoption of new technology) is possible through authoritarian capitalism. Many indicators, such as the Human Development Index and the Index of Economic Freedom also suggest that there are good signs that this growth will continue in the long term.

Economic freedom and political freedom are *not* the same thing. In reality, the present economic policies of many authoritarian regimes mirror Western liberalist ideology. Singapore and China have both introduced a system of economic neo-liberalism that values entrepreneurship and limited government interference with business (other than state-owned enterprises).

This essay will demonstrate that the economic liberalisation of some authoritarian regimes has resulted in the creation of a political system which promotes economic freedom but not political freedom; a system which promises long-term economic growth and development that is comparable to their liberal-democratic counterparts.

2.0 The Liberal Democratic Model

The liberal democratic model has been a pillar of the western world for many years. Western sensibilities would regard is as perhaps the greatest of all systems of government (or at least the greatest currently in existence). As the name suggests, liberal-democracy is a combination of liberal and democratic ideals and is often associated with constitutionalism, free and fair

[1] Ma, Laurence. 'China's authoritarian capitalism: growth, elitism and legitimacy' *International Planning Development Review*, Volume 31, Issue 1, 2009, p. 3

elections and individualism. Liberal-democracy is often believed to be superior to other forms of government as it both provides a check on authority, and provides more social and economic equality, but is this really the case?[2]

2.1 Liberalism

Liberalism is a political idea revolving around the importance of individuality and equality. Much of the modern liberal theory comes from the essay by John Stuart Mill, *'On Liberty'*. Mill argues strongly on the importance of individuality and liberty in society; suggesting that if individuality is stifled, it will be to the detriment of society as people will be prevented from reaching their full potential in life.[3]

Mill bases much of his discussion of liberalism around the 'harm principle'. Mill's 'harm principle' is a strong defence of individuality, stating that people should be allowed to act on their opinions without facing legal backlash from the state or social stigma from the community. Mill argues that the liberty to act on opinion is not an abstract right, rather an important vessel to encourage individuality, which is in the permanent interests of mankind. Mill suggest that people often make errors of judgement and hold incorrect opinions, and therefore differing "experiments of living" are essential to social progress as people will learn from and question each other's opinions and actions.[4]

Mill argues fervently in the chapter "Of Liberty and Discussion" that any attempt to limit another person's freedom of opinion and thought is illegitimate. According to Mill, the general interests of mankind are hurt by the silencing of individual opinions. Mill argues that no person is exempt from error, and although they may be extremely confident that their opinion is correct, silencing a contradicting opinion may mean that they are silencing the truth and holding mankind back as a result, "yet if…though backed by…public judgement…he prevents the opinion being heard in its defence, he assumes infallibility".[5]

Mill's ideas on liberalism have important implications for economic growth and development. Mill argues that people are most valuable to themselves and others when they develop individuality. This is because people are able to learn from each other, particularly people who actively resist conforming to social norms. Encouraging individuality allows an

[2] Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p. 46
[3] Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Suffolk, 1974, p. 120
[4] Ibid, p. 120
[5] Ibid, p. 84

atmosphere of originality and freedom. This atmosphere is essential as it allows people to take whichever course they see fit in order to reach their full potential. Furthermore, individuality allows us to see the positive traits of other people, and therefore our own weakness; something which is not possible in a society of forced conformity. In this way, a society with freedom of thought and action will develop faster than one without them.

2.2 Case study- The United States and Australia

Many scholars, such as Francis Fukuyama in his article "The End of History", regarded the fall of the Soviet Union as a triumph of liberal-democracy, proving it superior to all alternatives.[6] The American and Australian systems of government are shining examples of Western-liberal democracy in action. The United States Constitution emphasises personal liberties, limited government and the separation of powers, in line with the ideas of John Stuart Mill; an ideology which was been adopted by Australia. The people of the United States also tend to vehemently protest any increase in governmental power (which can perhaps be exemplified by the anti-socialist outcry regarding President Obama's health care reform).[7]

There can be little doubt that both of these countries, particularly the United States, reflect the considerable economic power of the West. The economy of the United States is the largest in the world, with a GDP of over $14 trillion USD.[8] In comparison, the GDP of China is only around $4.3 trillion USD. Australia's GDP is just over $1 trillion USD, an impressive figure for a country of just under 22 million citizens.[9] The military of the United States is also unequalled since the fall of the Soviet Union; military spending in the United States makes up 36% of the world's total military spending.[10]

Despite the obvious success of liberal-democratic capitalism in the economies of Australia and the United States, it is by no means a perfect system. Democracy is often flaunted as promoting equality and justice in society. However, in the United States and Australia, where these ideas are accepted wholeheartedly, inequality and injustice are rampant. There are vast differences in the wealth and power of different racial groups, as well as between genders.

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[6] Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, 1992 cited in Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p. 46

[7] **See:** Von Drehle, David et al. 'Tea Party America.' *Time*, Vol. 175, Issue 8, 2010

[8] 'Development Indicators: The United States', *World Bank* <http://data.worldbank.org/country/united-states> 2010 [accessed 12/05/2010]

[9] 'Development Indicators: Australia', *World Bank* <'http://data.worldbank.org/country/australia> 2010 [accessed 12/05/2010]

[10] Gittins, Ross and Tiffen, Rodney. *How Australia Compares*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 149

Racial inequality in the United States is perhaps best shown by contrasting the arrest rates of young black and white males. In Connecticut, approximately one in every 33 black men will be incarcerated in their lifetime, while only one white man in 205 will be jailed.[11] Similar racial inequality exists in Australia; the life expectancy of Indigenous Australians is around 17 years less than white Australians.[12] It seems that these figures either indicate institutional racism in the United States and Australia, or are symptomatic of a biased democratic system where a disproportionately large number of opportunities are handed to the wealthier group of middle and upper class white people.

The Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, also provides insight into the significant inequality that exists in the United States and Australia despite their liberal-democracy. The coefficient determines income inequality on a scale of 0 to 1 (1 being the most unequal). In a study of 18 developed countries in the early 21st century, the United States scored 0.318, the most unequal of all the countries surveyed. Australia scored 0.301, which was above the mean score.[13] Furthermore, inequality in the US is also apparent when we examine the proportionate wealth of its richest citizens: the richest 1% of US citizens receives 16.5% of the total income.[14]

It seems that the promotion of liberal ideas can indeed lead to economic stimulation through individualism and entrepreneurship, but the democratic systems of the West do not necessarily ensure that equality and justice reign supreme. The United States, and most other Western countries, still present extensive economic and social inequality. So, do economically liberalised authoritarian regimes present an alternative in terms of economic growth and development, and distribution of wealth?

3.0 The Authoritarian Model

'Authoritarian capitalism' is the introduction of a free market system into countries which are ruled by a non-elected and usually autocratic government. Policies are introduced on a 'top-down' basis from a tight political oligarchy.[15] These countries have proven that capitalism is not necessarily the exclusive domain of the liberal-democratic West. In fact, countries such as

[11] Coppolo, George and McCarthy, Kevin. *Crime Rate and Conviction Rates Broken Down by Race.* < http://www.cga.ct.gov/2008/rpt/2008-R-0008.htm> 2008 [accessed 19/05/2010]
[12] 'Indigenous Life Expectancy', *Australian Government, Institute of Health and Welfare* <http://www.aihw.gov.au/mortality/life_expectancy/indig.cfm> 2008 [accessed 29/05/2010]
[13] Gittins, Ross and Tiffen, Rodney. *How Australia Compares*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 136
[14] Ibid. p. 138
[15] Ma, Laurence. 'China's authoritarian capitalism: growth, elitism and legitimacy' *International Planning Development Review*, Volume 31, Issue 1, 2009, p. 2

China have shown capacity for further economic growth in periods where the economies of the liberal-democratic countries have faltered and required the investment of huge amounts of government capital. At the height of the global financial crisis in 2009, real GDP growth in the US was -2.7%, while China's was 6.3%.[16] In the words of Laurence Ma, "so much for 'minimum state' policies".[17] Two countries which could perhaps be deemed economic 'success stories' through use of the authoritarian capitalism model will now be discussed: China and Singapore.

3.1 Case Study-China

For years the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism has been producing steady increases in growth and economic output. Economic policy is decided by the top echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and passed down. Many economists have lauded the use of "Beijing Consensus" as an effective means of introducing economic self-determination, growth and sustainability, and an alternative for liberal-democratic capitalism.[18]

Before Mao's death in 1976, China suffered from the same economic problems as many of the other socialist and communist governments of the era. Namely, economic stagnation brought about by a lack of incentives, outdated machinery and inefficient governance.[19] After Mao's death, the leaders of the CCP decided that significant reform was necessary to boost China's economic stability. Thus, many neoliberal economic policies were introduced, while maintaining the primacy of the Party. This has lead to the socialist economy and its inefficiencies largely being swept aside by the fast tempo of Chinese economic development and the introduction of a capitalist system in the country. The Chinese government has introduced neo-liberalism as a method of obtaining lasting economic growth and development; it is being used as a tool rather than a political ideal.[20] Where a liberal-democratic country decides economic policy based on a measure of consensus and public opinion, as mentioned above, the Chinese system involves decision making by a small oligarchy of rulers whose policies are quickly initiated nation-wide. Thus, many capitalistic policies have been initiated in China, such as the introduction of the free market and the

[16] 'China Country Review', *CountryWatch Inc* <www.countrywatch.com> 2010 [accessed 28/05/2010] p. 379
[17] Ibid. p. 4
[18] Ibid. p. 1
[19] Ibid. p. 4
[20] Ibid. p. 2

privatisation of the elements of production, reductions in social welfare and the attraction of foreign investment.[21]

These policies have produced great success for China's economy. According to a 2006 Congressional brief from the Federation of American Scientists, China's average annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate in the post-reform period (1979-2005) is around 9.7%, whereas the pre-reform (1960-1978) figure is just 5.3%.[22] According to the brief, this growth was brought about through a large increase in foreign investment, coupled with an increase in industrial productivity. Furthermore, there was a reallocation of resources to areas of strength, including agricultural reforms which allowed rural peasants to seek employment in manufacturing and other industries, as well as economic decentralisation and non-interference in new enterprise.[23] Thus, we can see that through the introduction of an authoritarian capitalist model at the expense of socialism, China has almost doubled its yearly growth rate.[24]

Chinese authoritarian capitalism is not without fault however. There has been serious concern at the level of economic inequality and environmental damage that is now present in the country.[25] Deng Xiaoping, one of the first of China's economic reformers stated that it was important for a select group of Chinese people to get rich first, before any sort of co-prosperity could occur; thus creating a precedent for protecting the interests of 'major players' in the economy before the interests of the people, a precedent that has been largely followed by subsequent leaders.[26]

It is significant to note on this subject, however, that the economic success of China in recent decades, although disproportionately enjoyed by a select few, has in fact increased the legitimacy of the CCP in the eyes of many of its citizens. For many Chinese, legitimacy has depended on the government's ability to provide economic success, something which was quite clearly been achieved in recent decades.[27] Furthermore, the expanding Chinese

[21] Ibid. p. 3
[22] Morrison, Wayne. 'China's Economic Conditions'. *Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress*, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IB98014.pdf> 2006 (accessed 15/05/2010), p. 3
[23] Ibid. p. 4
[24] Ibid. p. 3
[25] Ma, Laurence. 'China's authoritarian capitalism: growth, elitism and legitimacy' *International Planning Development Review*, Volume 31, Issue 1, 2009 , p. 3
[26] Ibid. p. 3
[27] Ibid. p. 5

economy has significantly achieved its power and prestige in the international system, a definite positive in the eyes of many Chinese, particularly educated urbanites.[28]

This expansion of government legitimacy in the eyes of the population can perhaps be explained in terms of the Human Development Index. This index "looks beyond GDP"; also taking into account the development of a country's citizens based on life expectancy, education and standard of living.[29] Between 1995 and 2005, the Human Development Index of China was the sixth fastest growing in the world. This would indicate that while much of the country's wealth is in the hands of a select few at the moment, the standard of living in the rest of the country is showing signs of improvement, in line with the liberal idea that entrepreneurship will result in a flow of wealth from entrepreneurs to other citizens.

The Chinese leaders have seemingly acknowledged the fact that increasing economic prosperity may well lead to the demand for more political participation. Thus, in a 'pre-emptive strike' the CCP has allied itself with many distinguished intellectuals, scientists and capitalists (people who would otherwise lead the march for political participation), attempting to integrate them into the ruling class. The close ties between the political and social elites have an impact further than just stemming dissatisfaction however; it has lead to a measure of 'crony capitalism' where capitalists can use political ties for economic benefit. In this way, both the economic and political elites are working cooperatively to ensure the stability of the authoritarian capitalist system. Furthermore, the Chinese capitalist 'class' is not homogenous, some rely on government connection while others only rely on themselves or their families; thus no united pro-democracy front is presented by the capitalists.[30]

Through the introduction of economic 'neo-liberalism' while maintaining political restraints the Chinese government has created an economic system which promotes entrepreneurship while ensuring that policy making is still in the hands of the CCP. This has lead to significant economic growth, as well as human development, which has outpaced many liberal-democratic countries.

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[28] Ibid. p. 5

[29] 'Human Development Report 2009: Australia', *United Nations Development Program* <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_AUS.html> 2009 [accessed 26/05/2010]

[30] Dimitrov, Martin. 'Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China.' *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 123, Issue 4, 2009, p. 721

3.2 Case Study: Singapore

It is often claimed that economic success will inevitably lead to liberal-democracy being adopted in a society.[31] A growing middle class coupled with increasing financial inequality will inevitably, some believe, lead to democracy and an increasing desire for social welfare.[32] Singapore is a shining example of why this is not necessarily the case. Under the guidance of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore has achieved significant economic success as a centre of business and a trading hub; and despite this success there seems to be little push towards the introduction of a western-style liberal-democratic government.

Similar to China, Singapore has adopted economic liberalisation while remaining largely autocratic. According to the United States Country Review, Singapore was given a political freedom rank of 5 (with 7 being the worst); in comparison, the United States was given a ranking of 1.[33] However, the Index of Economic Freedom shows that in comparison, Singapore's economy is quite free. The index is calculated annually by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, which is "grounded in classical economic theories of Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek", thus making it a "time tested formula for sustained economic growth".[34] The index surveys 180 countries and gives them a rating based on 10 dimensions of economic freedom. It then divides the countries into five categories, ranging from 'free' to 'repressed'. The highest ranking countries are Hong Kong and Singapore, neither of which are democracies: clearly demonstrating that economic freedom and political freedom are not the same thing.[35]

Singapore's per capita GDP and growth rate is higher than many developed countries, achieving steady growth through the past 6 years (fig 1). It also maintains one of the world's busiest ports and one of its finest airlines.[36] The standard of living in Singapore is also very high (second only to Japan in Asia), and it also maintains an exceptional rate of English literacy.[37]

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[31] Paul, E. C. 'Obstacles to Democratisation in Singapore'. *Centre for Southeast Asian Studies*, Working Paper No. 78, 1992 cited in Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p.1
[32] Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p.1
[33] 'United States Country Review ', *CountryWatch Inc* <www.countrywatch.com> 2010 [accessed 28/05/2010]
[34] Gittins, Ross and Tiffen, Rodney. *How Australia Compares*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.235
[35] Ibid. p.235
[36] Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p. 45
[37] Ibid. p. 45

(Fig 1) Singapore GDP Growth[38]

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Singapore GDP Growth	9.6%	7.3%	8.4%	7.8%	1.1%
Singapore per capita GDP (USD)	$26,319	$28,352	$31,621	$36,384	$37,597

Singapore is an effective counter-example to the aforementioned idea that economic success will lead to liberal-democracy, as not only has its economy achieved significant success, the government shows little sign of collapsing under public pressure for reform. Singapore has been described as "clearly authoritarian", yet Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), is distinct from other authoritarian regimes as it prefers hegemony to dictatorship. This means that PAP leads through the consent of the led.[39] Policies are implemented "not simply through coercion, but on consensus".[40] For this reason, Singapore was ranked number two in the world for government efficiency in a 2010 survey by the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook.[41]

PAP bases its rule on 'Asian values' which create a distinct version of authoritarian capitalism. While many Western countries have been forced to 'water down' their capitalist ideologies in order to provide social welfare and equality, Singapore has clung to what can be described as "old liberalism": a strongly liberal economic system where social inequalities can be justified as necessary and welfare is run privately through non-government institutions such as churches or community groups.[42] So-called 'Asian values' legitimise this lack of

[38] 'Development Indicators: Singapore' *World Bank* <http://data.worldbank.org/country/singapore?display=default> 2010 [accessed 3/05/2010]
[39] Lim, Lisa. "Hegemony and Political Dominance in Singapore" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Marriott Hotel, Loews Philadelphia Hotel, Philadelphia, PA*, Aug 12, 2005. <http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p21520_index.html>, p.1
[40] Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p.47
[41] 'IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 1995-2010', *International Institute for Management Development* < http://www.worldcompetitiveness.com/> 2010 [accessed 19/05/2010]
[42] Sim, Soek-Fang. 'Asian Values, Authoritarianism and Capitalism in Singapore' *The Public*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 2001, p.49

government welfare, saying that communities and individuals should be as self reliant as possible, and not make demands on the state (perhaps displayed by Singapore's laws requiring people to financially provide for their elderly parents).[43]

Singapore also maintains a surprisingly free level of media exposure for an authoritarian regime. Lee Kuan Yew based PAP's policy on the media largely around that of the Vatican:

"The Vatican maintains Catholic unity around the world by clearly communicating its official or doctrinal position… Catholics may read other views … but they make a distinction between the official view and the other views. Whether or not they accept the official view is a different and separate matter. In the same way, Asian governments will require the official view to be carried in the media, along with other views over which they have no control"[44]

In this way, the PAP gives the official view of a particular event or issue, providing a 'moral compass' amidst the varying different opinions. Thus, censoring dissent is largely unnecessary.

Similar to China, the main issue with the Singaporean version of authoritarian capitalism is that is stifles individual liberties. The highly competitive, meritocratic and government influenced Singaporean society that has been created under the practice of 'old liberalism' has meant that a highly rigid path has been set for young people; there is little room for self expression and very few second chances for the unsuccessful.[45]

4.0 Conclusion: is authoritarian capitalism a viable alternative?

Through examination of the economic growth rates of both authoritarian and liberal-democratic countries it is clear that while authoritarian countries lack the fundamental freedoms that we in the West value so highly, authoritarian capitalism can indeed present a viable alternative.

It must be noted that economic liberty and political liberty are *not* the same thing. When examining economic liberty alone, the two systems do not appear to be radically different. Countries such as China and Singapore have initiated a system than can be described as 'economic neo-liberalism'. This involves policies such as the introduction of free markets and government non-intervention in private enterprise while maintaining restrictions on freedom

[43] Ibid. p.49
[44] Ibid. p. 51
[45] Ibid. p. 60

of speech and political participation. In this way, authoritarian governments have been able to produce significant economic success; adopting some of Mill's ideas on achieving success through individual entrepreneurship while shedding others that may challenge the state's primacy. This results in efficient economic lawmaking and administration.

It is also often suggested that economic growth will result in agitation for increased political participation, inferring that liberal-democracy is the 'next step' for economically successful authoritarian regimes. However, China and Singapore have shown us that this in not necessarily the case. The Chinese government's involvement of intellectual and economic elites, which would otherwise be leading the charge for democracy, has ensured that the system remains highly stable regardless of economic growth. While the Singaporean government's emphasis on hegemony has meant that little active dissent occurs. In a similar vein, the idea that liberal-democracy promotes equality and justice is also not necessarily the case; with the distribution of wealth in most Western countries showing the same inequality that is apparent in China or Singapore.

The main issue with authoritarian capitalism seems to be the ease in which it could degenerate, given the corrupting nature of absolute power. The right people must be in power in order for the authoritarian regime to avoid being reduced to a quagmire of corruption and power abuse. It seems that China had such a leader in Deng Xiaoping and Singapore in Lee Kuan Yew (unfortunately countless other dictatorships have not been quite so lucky). Given there is such strong evidence to the contrary, it would be highly western-centric to assert that authoritarian capitalism does not present a viable alternative, when administered by the right people. Neither should we assume that democracy and capitalism must go hand-in-hand just because Western capitalists are typically pro-democracy; China and Singapore have both introduced capitalist systems which are arguably more economically neoliberal than the United States or Australia, and show little sign of accepting democracy.

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